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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 003382

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SUBJECT: CHAVISTAS WIN BIG IN REGIONAL ELECTIONS

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for Reasons 1.4(b).

Summary

1. (U) Pro-Chavez candidates won 20 of 22 governorships and the mayoralty of metropolitan Caracas in the October 31 regional elections. Governors Enrique Mendoza (Miranda State) and Henrique Salas Feo (Carabobo) trailed their Chavista opponents and challenged the accuracy of the preliminary results released early November 1 by the National Electoral Council (CNE). Opposition candidates in Zulia State and Nueva Esparta State won. In Caracas, Baruta Mayor Enrique Capriles and Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez, of the opposition party Primero Justicia, won, as did Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) Libertador Mayor Freddy Bernal. The winners begin their terms of office within a week or two of the local electoral boards' certification of results. Voter turnout was low in both opposition and pro-Chavez strongholds, reaching 60 percent nationwide. President Hugo Chavez and his supporters took advantage of the relatively calm voting day to dig at the U.S. by expressing hope that the United States' elections be as transparent that of Venezuela. End summary.

Preliminary Results Give

2. (U) The National Electoral Council (CNE) released preliminary results of the regional elections just after midnight on November 1. CNE Director Jorge Rodriguez noted that the results were partial, based on information transmitted from voting machines and, in a few cases, were not sufficient to confirm a winner. According to the partial count, pro-Chavez candidates won 20 of 22 governor seats. (The CNE gave results for only a handful of the 335 mayoral races.) The CNE announced the victory of Chavista luminaries such as former Infrastructure Minister Diosdado Cabello in Miranda State, Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) Deputy Tarek William Saab in Anzoategui State, and retired National Guard General Felipe Acosta Carles in Carabobo State. MVR Deputy Juan Barreto easily won control of the mayoralty of the Caracas federal district. Pro-Chavez Maracaibo Mayor Giancarlo DiMartino appeared to have lost in the initial report, but subsequent announcements by Maracaibo election officials suggested he might yet prevail.

3. (U) On the opposition side, Zulia State Governor Manuel Rosales held a commanding lead over retired army general Alberto Gutierrez in that state. Former Nueva Esparta State (Margarita Island) Governor Morel Rodriguez beat pro-Chavez incumbent Alexis Navarro in that state. In the Caracas federal district, Baruta Mayor Enrique Capriles and Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez, both of Primero Justicia, handily won their races.

Opposition Challenges Some Results

4. (U) While MVR candidate Diosdado Cabello was giving his victory speech for his 52-48% win in Miranda State, Governor Enrique Mendoza publicly announced that his count showed otherwise. Mendoza claimed that his tabulation of copies of tally sheets showed a 53-47% tilt in his favor. Cabello said Mendoza's reaction is "damaging" to the State and called on Mendoza to make his appeal via the courts. In Carabobo, Governor Henrique Salas Feo rejected the CNE's announcement and claimed to have a 26% lead over the pro-Chavez candidate. The opposition governors of Bolivar and Yaracuy states, Antonio Rojas Suarez and Eduardo Lapi, made similar challenges to the CNE results. According to electoral law, state and municipal electoral boards certify the results of gubernatorial and mayoral races, respectively, within two days after the election. Once certified, the newly elected officials are inaugurated within one to two weeks, depending on regulations in each state and municipality.

Voting Day: Relative Calm, High Abstention

15. (U) Election day was marked by relative calm with only sporadic reports of irregularities in voting procedures. Preliminary results suggest 60 percent abstention nationwide. In contrast to the endless hours of waiting in line during the August 15 presidential recall referendum, voters waited no more than 30 minutes. Fingerprint-capturing computers were used at most centers to verify identity of voters and did not slow down the voting lines. The CNE extended voting one hour to 5:00 p.m. to accommodate latecomers. Emboffs observed minimal numbers of people in lines at dozens of voting centers in Caracas and nearby states. GOV officials repeated throughout the day that abstention rates in regional elections are historically high. Chavez contended to reporters after he cast his vote that abstention rates are lower than those of the U.S., which sometimes reach 80%.

GOV Wishes U.S. Well In Nov. 2 Vote

16. (U) During a press conference at his assigned polling place, Chavez extolled the transparency of Venezuelan voting procedures and the cutting-edge technology used. Chavez said his country's voting system is more transparent, more direct than that of the United States, taking a swipe at the U.S. Electoral College as an affront to "direct democracy." Vice President Rangel told reporters he hoped U.S. elections would be transparent and not leave doubts among the voters.

Comment

17. (C) True to their predictions, the Chavistas have handed the opposition a stinging electoral defeat. We expect a similar sweep for Chavez's candidates at the mayoral level. Governors Mendoza and Salas may have a chance to pull out a victory as more results are reported, but it seems unlikely. Abstention rates are only slightly higher than in previous regional elections here, making the unusually high turnout in the presidential recall referendum look ever more like an outlier. From our informal observation, abstention seemed to affect both sides, with opposition voters apathetic after the referendum loss and Chavista campaigns suffering from less "walking around money" than what was available in the referendum.

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